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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY MOSS

REF: BAMAKO 485

1.(SBU) Summary: We welcome the upcoming visit of Deputy Assistant Secretary Moss to Mali. The Deputy Assistant Secretary's visit will provide an important opportunity to highlight U.S. support for Mali, a moderate, majority Muslim democracy now confronted by two major challenges -- the world food crisis and an incipient rebellion in the north. According to the World Bank and Mali's Commissioner for Food Security, Mali is one of the few countries in the region that does not currently face a food shortage crisis. That said, rising food prices have affected consumption patterns in Mali and the Ministry of Economy has predicted eventual food shortages for some remote areas. In Mali's northern region of Kidal, renewed attacks against the Malian military by different Tuareg rebel groups have endangered implementation of the Algiers Accords. Foreign Minister Moustapha Ouane recently returned from Algiers with welcome news of Algeria's decision to resume mediation between Mali and Tuareg forces. Unfortunately, rebel attacks continue, making it more and more difficult for President Toure to advocate for a peaceful solution to the conflict. Northern Mali also serves as a safe-haven for al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which continues to hold two Austrian hostages. U.S. assistance to Mali plays a major role in addressing the development, economic and security challenges confronting the Malian government and its people. Mali is also an important ally in the global war on terrorism and a key member of the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP). Spreading instability in the north has already forced us to scale back assistance efforts for northern Mali and we are concerned that increased unrest will have a profound impact on our development and security goals for the north. End Summary.

Malian Democracy and International Engagement

2.(U) As a moderate majority Muslim democracy with over 15 years of democratic experience, Mali serves as an example for west Africa and beyond. President Amadou Toumani Toure, who is known to Malians as "ATT," was re-elected to a second and final five year term as President in 2007 with more than 70 percent of the vote. His closest presidential challenger, former National Assembly president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK), finished second with less than 20 percent.

3.(U) Mali is a responsible and engaged international partner. It has a strong human rights record and is one of the few members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference to be rated as "free" by Freedom House. Mali is also a leader in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of press freedoms, although this record was tarnished somewhat by the 2007 arrest and conviction of several journalists for "offending the President." The journalists were given small fines and suspended sentences. In addition to serving as the 2007 Chair of the Community of Democracies, Mali is active in the

United Nations and other international organizations and has participated in several international peacekeeping operations.

4.(SBU) Unfortunately, Mali's political progress has not been matched by improved social and economic indicators. In 2007 the United Nations gave Mali a ranking of 173 out of 177 countries on its Human Development Index due in large part to literacy rates, health indicators and a per capita GNP that are among the lowest in the world. These factors, along with significant food security concerns, insecurity and the continued presence of al Qaeda-aligned terrorist elements in the country's sparsely populated northern regions, constitute serious threats to Malian democracy and regional stability. The U.S. plays a significant role in helping Mali to meet these challenges and reinforce almost two decades of democratic progress.

U.S. Assistance to Mali

5.(U) The November 2006 signing of a Millennium Challenge Account compact with Mali made the U.S. the largest bilateral donor to Mali. It also cemented strong U.S. - Mali relations and better positioned Mali as a force for stability in a politically fragile region. The USD 461 million compact entered into force in September 2007 and includes a USD 234 million irrigation project north of Segou and a USD 183 million airport renovation project.

6.(SBU) Mali is also an important ally in the global war on

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terror and a key member of the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP). TSCTP programming in Mali can be divided into programs focused on counter-terrorism and counter-extremism. Important counter-terrorism programs include bilateral training exercises like Joint Combined Exercise Training (JCET) events. Counter-extremism activities include a broad range of Department of Defense supported humanitarian assistance, USAID development programs and public diplomacy outreach. The Department of Defense's Humanitarian Assistance Program has contributed over USD 3 million to Mali since 1999 to build wells, construct schools and renovate health clinics. Mali is an active participant in the DOD's International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. We also provide resources to train three Malian units in peacekeeping operations through the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) program.

7.(SBU) Malians practice a predominately open and tolerant form of Islam and are therefore unreceptive to extremist messages. Our TSCTP counter-extremism programs are designed to promote moderate messages and ensure that Malians remain unreceptive to extremist ideologies. TSCTP programs administered jointly by the State Department, USAID and the Department of Defense are designed to ensure that this remains the case and counter the possible spread of extremist ideologies. USAID/Mali considers the northern region of Mali an important area and has undertaken activities there in a concerted effort since 1999. USAID/Mali implemented approximately \$3.7 million worth of activities in the north during FY07, including support to 35 rural health centers, the construction and reinforcement of 17 community radio stations, the establishment of six community telecenters offering internet access, the conduct of conflict-mitigation activities, support to rice and horticultural commodities, the expansion of access to financial services, the provision of scholarships and mentoring to 6,500 girls under the Ambassador's Girls Scholarship Fund, and the creation of teacher training and radio-based instruction for children of nomadic populations. USAID/Mali received an additional \$9.5 million in TSCTP funds and the majority of these resources have been earmarked for activities in the north that aim to

expand economic opportunities for youth, construct additional community radio stations, build capacity for local government, and support madersas throughout the country. On the Public Affairs side, we have used cultural preservation grants to help Mali honor its Islamic heritage by protecting thousands of ancient Islamic manuscripts in Djenne and Timbuktu and helping to preserve an ancient mosque in Gao. We additionally recently celebrated the year anniversary of the only American Corner in Mali. Located in Gao, it has allowed us to quadruple our outreach to key contacts in the region and to further promote mutual understanding between Malians and Americans.

Food Security

8.(U) According to the World Bank and Mali's Commissioner for Food Security, Mali is one of the few countries in the region that does not currently face a food crisis. The World Bank and other donors have, in fact, criticized Mali for exacerbating the regional food crisis by blocking the export of cereals. Although Mali currently has enough rice for the next three months of consumption, this is not enough to carry over until the October harvests, creating the potential for shortages when current stocks are depleted. Many Malians have already begun replacing staple goods with alternative, cheaper commodities due to rising food prices. The Minister of Economy predicted eventual food shortages in certain remote areas and has signaled his intention to request assistance from the international community. Higher prices will hit Mali's northern regions harder because these areas produce less and import more agricultural products, making them more susceptible to exogenous shocks.

9.(U) The USG is already extremely engaged in supporting Mali's agricultural sector. USAID provides almost \$1 million in annual support to Mali's rice sector, including in the areas of irrigation, access to arable land, wells, financing, and support for the commercial sales of rice. This is in addition to the \$3 million spent annually by USAID, in collaboration with American universities, to help introduce new technology into the cultivation of sorghum and millet. The MCC's \$234 million project in Alatona is focused on modernizing the irrigation system and developing 14,000 hectares of additional irrigable land.

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Security Challenges

10.(SBU) Security concerns in northern Mali constitute a significant challenge for the Malian government (Reftel). Mali has weathered two Tuareg rebellions (one in 1963 and a second during the 1990s) since independence. In May 2006 Tuareg rebels attacked two Malian military outposts in northern Mali and rekindled fears of another prolonged rebellion. President Toure resisted calls from some Malian political leaders to force a military confrontation with the rebels and instead opted for dialogue mediated by Mali's northern neighbor, Algeria. In July 2006 Mali and the Tuareg rebels signed a peace agreement, known as the Algiers Accords, which pledged to provide increased development and infrastructure support to Mali's three northern regions. In 2007 a dissident group of Tuareg rebels led by Ibrahim Bahanga resumed attacks against Malian military posts and convoys. Bahanga held several dozen Malian soldiers hostage for nearly six months until Libya helped negotiate their release in March 2008. Less than two weeks later Bahanga seized another group of Malian soldiers. He and another rebel group, the Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC), are now holding anywhere from 60 to 90 Malian soldiers hostage.

11.(SBU) There are now several different armed Tuareg rebel

groups and militias operating in northern Mali and attacks have spread beyond Kidal to the regions of Gao and Segou. Algeria's recent decision to resume its mediation efforts is a welcome development. However, the April 10 executions of two ADC members in Kidal and the increasing number of rebel attacks have significantly complicated attempts to implement the Algiers Accords. Although President Toure remains committed to a peaceful resolution of the current crisis through the Algiers Accords framework, pressure for him to respond militarily is rising. Key aspects of the Algiers Accords are the creation of special mixed military units and the reduction of Malian forces in the north to pre-2006 troop levels. Neither of these components can be implemented without a cease-fire that is respected by all Tuareg rebel groups.

12.(SBU) In addition to the unfolding Tuareg crisis, Mali's sparsely populated and vast northern regions also serve as a haven for smugglers, bandits and terrorist elements. The Malian government is unable to fully secure these zones due to their size and remote nature. Algerian Islamic extremists formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) but now called al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Mahgreb (AQIM) continue to use northern Mali as a safe haven and are currently holding two Austrian hostages on Malian territory.

Comment: U.S. Support for Mali

13.(SBU) Mali's successful 2007 presidential and legislative elections served as an important benchmark for Mali's democratic progress. Renewed Tuareg unrest in northern Mali, and the continued presence of AQIM elements, are jeopardizing this progress. Current security, development, and economic challenges mean that Mali and international partners like the U.S. must work together to ensure that Mali's path toward democracy continues to advance in the right direction. Your visit to Mali at this critical moment will serve as a further demonstration of USG support for Mali and its people at the same time that it will afford an important opportunity for us to engage Malian government officials on need for forward movement on the Algiers Accords.
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